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The literary climate in East Germany

Any survey of the current literary scene in East Germany is necessarily overshadowed by the crisis which followed the expulsion in November 1976 of the dissident poet and folk-singer, Wolf Biermann. Twelve of the GDR's most distinguished writers and a leading sculptor, men and women who had hitherto pushed for more liberal cultural policies from inside the system, reacted by publishing in the West a letter asking the regime to reconsider its decision. In the days which followed nearly a hundred other writers and artists added their name to the petition. The Party, at first stunned by this unusual display of opposition, soon returned to the offensive. The loyalist/opportunist majority with the Writers' Union was duly mobilised and condemned its independently-minded colleagues, many of whom were then expelled from the Party. Those protesters who did not eat humble pie were attacked, ignored or encouraged, directly or indirectly, to leave the country. Many have done so, albeit with a heavy heart, as both dissidents and critics of the regime within the literary establishment are, for all their criticism of GDR Communism, Marxists and believers that East Germany is the better German state.

In such circumstances the prospect for writers would seem bleak. Yet the regime has tried to suggest that the Biermann affair will make no difference, that the less restrictive *Kulturpolitik*, introduced by Erich Honecker when he took over nearly eight years ago, is to continue. It has, for instance, not stopped the publication of works by authors who signed the letter of protest. Thus not only did Christa Wolf's latest work, *Childhood Pattern* (Kindheitsmuster, 1976), a fictional investigation of how the 1920s generation was compromised by Nazism, appear a few days after she had been 'severely reprimanded' for penning her name to the infamous petition, but the book was warmly praised by the critics. Yet her book was conceived in a very different climate from that now prevalent. For by interfering so drastically in

cultural matters, the Party leadership has exposed the limitations of – indeed, destroyed – a central principle of its own *Kulturpolitik*, namely that the artists' organisation should settle their own affairs and decide which works were permissible. Such an autonomy pre-supposed an atmosphere of trust between writers and Party – an atmosphere which now is no more. This can only inhibit the more talented and independently-minded authors. In its place reigns uncertainty.

To understand what the present situation means for the GDR and her culture, it is necessary to analyse, first, the main thrust of literary development in East Germany, and second, the political climate in which it has operated.

Frustrating years

The 1960s saw the emergence of a new generation of writers, most of whom had been children, or at most teenagers, at the end of the war. Unlike the older generation, for whom the epic struggle *against* capitalism, fascism and war and *for* the new socialist society was everything, the starting point for the younger writers is the new society in which they have spent all their adult lives. They have discovered conflicts between the individual and society, often antagonistic conflicts which in the official view should have been overcome by the new order. Unlike the older generation, who either did not feel these conflicts or were content to ignore them, the younger writers have wished to express them in their works. In that sense, the younger writers have written more realistic books. But sometimes the alienation, both observed and felt, has forced the writer back on himself. The literary result has been intense preoccupation with the self, what the Germans call *Flucht ins Private*. Both tendencies – the greater realism and the greater inwardness – have resulted in prose, verse and plays which have little to do with socialist realism, both as regards form and content.

The 1960s were frustrating years for the younger generation – and indeed for those older writers

who wanted to write more critically than they had done in the past. The Ulbricht leadership disliked much of the new writing, and after a few years of unwilling tolerance, sent the portcullis crashing down at the end of 1965. A series of virulent attacks at the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee were followed by the dismissal of the offending writers from cultural institutions and editorial offices and the banning of their works. In many ways the repression was cruder than today. It was also accompanied by efforts to force literature to reflect much more closely the regime's economic and political policies. Thus according to the 'Bitterfeld Way' – so called after the conference of writers, workers and the Party leadership in the town of that name – writers should seek inspiration from workers in factories, and workers should consider writing themselves.

'No taboos'

With the exception of a very few works such as Christa Wolf's *Reflections About Christa T.* (*Nachdenken über Christa T.*, 1968), widely considered to be one of the finest East German novels, Party policies produced more resentment than literature. However, with the accession of Erich Honecker as party leader in 1971, there came a change. Although, as we shall see later, Honecker's prime concern was economic, and although he himself has no deep understanding of the arts, the new leader believed the regime was strong enough – would indeed benefit from – a more subtle and more flexible *Kulturpolitik*. Honecker's declaration in December 1971, that in his view 'there can be no taboos in the fields of art and literature so long as one's starting point is basically socialist', was a tacit admission that socialist realism, as it had been interpreted hitherto, was too narrow to accommodate the younger generation of writers. Honecker's clarion call sent a thrill of excitement through East Germany's artistic community. 'We had,' to quote one writer, 'the most fantastic feeling of freedom. Our literature and culture came alive, and I believe some extremely good work was produced before things started tightening up again.' One writer who exploited the new freedom was Ulrich Plenzdorf, then in his late thirties. He wrote the screenplay for *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, which was a box-office sensation, and was also author of the play *The New Sufferings of Young W* (*Die Neuen*

Leiden des Jungen W, 1972). Both works focussed on that delicate subject of alienation.

The New Sufferings of Young W, is the tale of a teenager who, after a row at work, leaves town and goes to live in a shack on an allotment outside East Berlin. There he leads the life of a dropout, playing his tapes of beat music, flirting with the local kindergarten teacher, and generally enjoying a life free of restriction – until his death, which smacks strongly of suicide. Yet Edgar's death is, in many ways, the least indication of his alienation from society. The audience experiences Edgar's resentment at the authoritarian attitude of his employers. Edgar is also neglected at home; his parents are separated (the GDR has a very high divorce rate) and his mother is too taken up with her work and political responsibilities to devote enough time to him. Edgar's two favourite books are *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Robinson Crusoe* – an appropriate choice in view of their themes of human isolation, yet hardly models for socialist man, as a senior member of the Politbüro has since remarked.

The Party's doubts notwithstanding, the play was an enormous success. It ran to packed audiences for years and made the author a household name. *The New Sufferings* appealed particularly to young people – not just to the non-conformist minority who have or might actually behave as Edgar does, but to the conformist majority who, superficially at least, live as the Party expects them to. Thus an opinion poll conducted by the youth magazine *Forum* revealed that 66% of those questioned would like Edgar as a friend.

Even if this work appears to take Honecker's promise of no taboos quite literally, it does, as Marcel Reich-Ranicki, a leading West German critic, has pointed out, contain one direct link with the more traditional hero of socialist realist fiction. Plenzdorf's hero may die – ideologically an unwarrantable occurrence given the supposedly unlimited opportunities for fulfilment open to him in socialist society – yet his death is not entirely in vain. For he leaves behind him a labour-saving invention, a paint-spraying machine, that he had been working on. Yet although the Party leadership may have noticed this positive feature, the play raised an issue – the age-old issue which any totalitarian system finds itself facing once it releases the brakes. How far can it go? If it allows one writer to raise such a sensitive subject as the

alienation of youth, what is to stop others going further and depicting it even more graphically and analysing its roots? The answer, as the Party leadership rapidly found, was certainly not the writers themselves. They could be counted on to press ahead.

Damning criticism

Three years later, in 1975, the country's leading literary journal, *Sinn und Form*, published a story which took Plenzdorf's theme of youthful alienation much further. For, whereas Plenzdorf described the symptom, Volker Braun, a well-established writer in his late thirties, described the sickness itself. Moreover, he did so without the humour and romanticism which softened the impact of *The New Sufferings*. 'Incomplete Story' ('Unvollendete Geschichte') is probably the most damning criticism of the system ever to have been published inside the country.

The story itself is very simple and yet, as anyone who has talked to East Germans knows, it depicts a typical enough occurrence in a state which operates according to the Leninist principle that 'trust is good, but control is better'. The tale describes the attempts of the authorities in a small provincial town to break up the relationship between two teenagers, Karin and Frank. One of the officials involved is Karin's own father. The reason for interfering in the couple's private life is a paltry one: the secret police have opened a letter from an old schoolmate of Frank's who had escaped to West Germany. The friend had written that he knew of a way Frank could get out too, should he want to. Frank, a respectable citizen and a supporter of the regime, did not respond to his friend's offer – as the secret police could easily have found out. However, the mere suspicion was enough for the authorities, just as for Karin's father, for whom the safety of the state against hypothetical danger was more important than his daughter's happiness. Braun accurately exposes the authoritarian mentality of the officials who relentlessly pressure her into leaving Frank. The author vividly records the confusion and anguish of a girl who had previously believed the regime's claim and had always done as she was told. The story ends with Karin and Frank together, though it takes Frank's attempted suicide for the authorities to leave the couple alone. Yet there is no happy end; the very title indicates that the future is un-

certain. Not only have Karin and Frank been subjected to an emotional trauma as harrowing as it was unnecessary, they have had their faith in East German Communism destroyed.

That such a devastating tale could be published in the GDR suggests that the autonomy of literature – that supposed hallmark of the Honecker *Kulturpolitik* – actually existed at the time. However, the furious reaction within both the Politburo and the Central Committee suggested that it would not survive. Indeed, it may have been the specialist nature of *Sinn und Form* – its circulation was about 10,000 – which prevented the issue from being confiscated.

Just how relative the autonomy of literature was and how important circulation figures could be was proved the year before 'Incomplete Story' appeared. At that time the Party leadership intervened to stop one of the grand old men of East German literature, Stefan Heym, signing a contract for the publication of his *Five Days in June*, a fictional account of the workers' rising in 1953. The contract envisaged an edition of 20,000, which would have meant a readership five times that number. The leadership knew that the number of copies of the West German edition, which would inevitably be smuggled in if no GDR edition appeared, would be substantially lower. They were not concerned with the literary merit of the work, which compares unfavourably with some of Heym's other writings. What worried them was the book's interpretation of a series of events which so shook the regime that no full account of what happened has been authorised to this day. For although Heym attaches undue weight to the activities of the Western *agents provocateurs*, he makes no bones about the central cause of the uprising: the breakdown in communications between the workers and their supposed representatives. Furthermore, he pinpoints the vexed problem of the Party's unaccountability to any other force or institution in the state. The Party was prepared, at least in its more tolerant moments, to allow Heym to discuss sensitive political issues if he disguised them by placing them in historical contexts. Thus *The Queen against Defoe* and *The King David Report*, which both investigated the role of the writer in unfree societies, were published in the GDR in the early seventies. But the regime would not tolerate any critical examination of the skeletons in the com-

munist cupboard. Although Heym cannot be included among the younger generation of writers – for a start he is more than 20 years older than most of them – his nose for issues, particularly those with a civil rights flavour, has always kept him in the front line of East German writers who are forever trying to widen the areas available to discussion and publication. His interest in overtly political issues has linked him with the younger generation, as their exploration of alienation has gradually brought them to examine those political structures which have caused this alienation. In Plenzdorf's play, the political component is only implicit. In Braun's short story, the role of the Ministry of State Security is all too plain. Thus the banning of *Five Days in June* and the uproar which followed the publication of 'Incomplete Story' indicated that the Party leadership was both aware of and worried about the direction in which the country's most talented and independently-minded writers were moving.

Gunning for Kunze

Just how worried the Party was became abundantly clear a year later, in the autumn of 1976, when two opportunities for exemplary action presented themselves. The first was provided by Reiner Kunze, who at 44 had long been one of the leading younger poets. 'By nature, he is a lyrical poet of delicate perception,' the English critic Michael Hamburger has written, 'not the satirical, let alone polemical poet he was forced to become when his right to this perception was denied.' Out of favour in the late sixties, when he was attacked for both his concentration on the inner life and on his supposed anti-communism, Kunze – like Heym, Plenzdorf, Braun and others – benefited from the thaw, and an anthology of his verse appeared. His crime in 1976 was to publish *The Wonderful Years* (*Die Wunderbaren Jahre*) in West Germany, where, incidentally, his other books had also been published. *The Wonderful Years* is a collection of stories, both about Czechoslovakia (Kunze left the Party in 1968 in protest against the invasion) and about the alienation of East German youth (see *Index* 2/1977, pp.29-30).

Kunze's moving depiction of the petty but relentless way officialdom harasses young people accurately reflects an aspect of East German life. Yet it can be argued that this is no more critical than 'Incomplete Story'; indeed by mentioning

the unmentionable, the secret police, and by showing what havoc it and the civil authorities can wreak on the happiness and convictions of young people, Braun has surely written to greater effect. Such considerations do not seem to have bothered the authorities. They were apparently gunning for Kunze, and in October 1976 he was expelled from the Writers' Union for publishing *The Wonderful Years* in West Germany, even though, the author claims, he had permission to do precisely that. Months later Kunze emigrated to West Germany after being told by a senior official: 'You won't survive what we've got in store for you.'

The second victim was, of course, Wolf Biermann. Biermann was more than controversial: he was a dissident, yet one officially recognised by the state. Although banned from public performances since 1965 (when he was 29), he maintained contact with his public by means of the Western media. West German television and radio stations – the main source of information and entertainment for most East Germans – played films and recordings of Biermann's songs, smuggled out of his East Berlin flat. Biermann's songs are a vigorous and a biting indictment of the shortcomings of East German socialism, delivered in humorous, down-to-earth language. His message: remove the stultifying encumbrance of Stalinist bureaucracy and the true revolution, a humane socialist democracy, will triumph. The regime had long been worried by Biermann's appeal and was frequently irritated by his lampoons of its 'leading representatives'. But during the early years of Honecker's rule attempts were made to coax Biermann back into orthodoxy. However, Biermann's conditions were high: it was the regime which must compromise, not him. In the autumn of 1976, the authorities suddenly, and surprisingly, gave Biermann permission to make a concert tour in West Germany – his first for over ten years. Biermann appears to have believed, rather naively, that his trip was the first step in a process of rehabilitation on his own terms, that he would be able to sing and say what he liked while in West Germany. This he did, thus giving the regime the excuse it needed for barring his return. Biermann was deprived of his citizenship. Yet he had done nothing during the months before to explain why this was done in November 1976 rather than earlier. Indeed, his most recent album was largely made up of love songs which were

probably the least provocative ones he had ever recorded.

Seeking an alternative

I have indicated that neither *The Wonderful Years* nor Biermann's latest album were the real reason for the harsh treatment meted out to them. Honecker's more flexible cultural policy rested on premises which no longer applied with the same force. The centrepiece of the new leaders' domestic policies, inaugurated at the Eighth Party Congress in 1971, was consumerism. Honecker believed that faster increases in the standard of living would act as an incentive to increase labour productivity and, in the long term, enable the regime to put down stronger roots among the population. A natural concomitant to the more popular (in the literal sense of the word) policy was the belief that the regime was now secure enough to be more flexible in dealing with particular groups of citizens. Such an approach involved no weakening of the primacy of the Party – at least that is what the Honecker leadership thought at the time (and to prove its point, in 1972 it actually nationalised the bulk of the many enterprises still in private hands); the whole Honecker approach was one of flexibility within the orthodox framework. Thus the artistic community was not the only sector of society to be wooed by the new subtlety: great efforts were made to win the loyalty of youth by – among other measures – the opening of more discotheques.

The second premise of cultural relaxation was the external situation. At the beginning of the decade, the Soviet Union was in hot pursuit of détente, and in its efforts to reach agreements with West Germany and over Berlin, Moscow required that her ally on the Spree should present a more liberal image. The reward for such cooperation was a prize the GDR had sought in vain for over twenty years: diplomatic recognition by the West.

By 1974 a liberal image abroad was no longer mandatory. The major Western countries had opened their embassies Unter den Linden, and the Russians, satisfied with the détente agreements negotiated in Germany, were turning their attention elsewhere. But in the same year the Honecker leadership became aware of a development which threatened its whole domestic strategy: the worldwide inflation which followed the commodities boom and the oil crisis. This was particularly

serious as the GDR imports all its oil and nearly all its raw materials – mostly from the Soviet Union, which in January 1975 drastically raised its prices. In return, East Germany was allowed to raise the price of its manufactured goods to the Soviet Union, her largest trading partner. But these increases only covered two-thirds of the higher costs of Russian raw materials. The deterioration in East Germany's terms of trade has obviously reduced the resources available for consumption. Although the Honecker leadership is fighting hard to maintain the present more modest growth in living standards, some of their expedients, such as disguised price increases, have provoked protests by a public already weary of the inefficiencies of the GDR retail trade and now confronted by exhortations to increase their labour productivity still further. Two known cases of industrial unrest are, like the proverbial tips of the iceberg, symptomatic of widespread dissatisfaction with the economic situation.

To make matters worse, the internal unrest has been exacerbated by outside influences. The millions of West Germans and West Berliners who have been visiting the GDR since the coming into force of the Quadripartite Agreement (1972) and the Basic Treaty (1973) have, on balance, strengthened the popular East German view that both living standards and civil rights are more developed in the West. The fact that West Germans can visit their eastern cousins but that the reverse is very, very much less easy has had an unsettling effect. Encouraged by the freer atmosphere characteristic of the earlier years of Honecker's rule, many East Germans filed applications to emigrate, citing as justification the GDR's signing of both the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states that every human being has the right to leave his country, and the Helsinki Accord, which pledges governments to work for greater contact between ordinary people divided by the Iron Curtain. In 1976 the number of applications topped 120,000.

External influences have also encouraged those elements both within the Party and 'socialist' circles outside it who still harbour sympathies for a socialism on the Czechoslovak model. The impetus in this case is the rise of 'Eurocommunism' in the Italian, Spanish and French Communist Parties. The book by party member Rudolf Bahro entitled *The Alternative* (*Die Alternative*).

Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus, 1977), and the manifesto of an opposition group within the SED – both published in West Germany – are indications of dissatisfaction within the Party, even if Bahro cannot be easily categorised as a Eurocommunist and if doubts as to the manifesto's authenticity have not yet been laid to rest.

In the autumn of 1976 neither Bahro's book nor the manifesto had been published; but senior *apparatchiks* responsible for ideology and security were disturbed by the response to the publication of the texts of the speeches of Italian, French and Yugoslav leaders at the Conference of European Communist Parties in East Berlin in the summer. They had also taken note of the success of the Polish workers in stopping the planned price increases. The same officials were taken aback by the unusual self-confidence with which citizens were filing their emigration applications. Set against this background, the tendency of more and more writers to write about disagreeable matters was one more destabilising element. Taken on their own, the writers could probably have been dealt with more gently. But because of what they regarded as the other threats to their authority, the Party leadership felt obliged to take swift, purgative action. 'We will never allow agitation and subversion against socialism . . . enemies will be treated like enemies,' wrote the Minister of State Security, Erich Mielke, a year later. Affecting to see a counter-revolutionary threat, Biermann and Kunze were the obvious targets for any reassertion of state power. Even if neither of them had in recent months said or written anything substantially more critical than was their wont, both men, and particularly Biermann, provided inspiration for a number of writers and singers from a shadowy world on the fringe of the East German pop scene and some seats of higher learning: Biermann and Kunze were symbols for those who hoped the system would be reformed.

Sanctions and concessions

When the authorities turned to settle accounts with those who signed the letter protesting against Biermann's expatriation, they differentiated sharply between those signatories who – in general terms – really wished to change the basis of what is officially called 'real existing socialism' and those whose criticisms were made out of socialist

solidarity. The former category, the dissidents, received the severest treatment. The philosopher and natural scientist Robert Havemann was placed under house arrest. A number of dissident artists from the pop/student world were also arrested. (As were some of the most persistent would-be emigrants. Others who had filed applications found themselves in deep water.) However, the punishment for the critical socialists, who, in the regime's view, had strayed into opposition, was comparatively milder. Those six of the original thirteen signatories who were members of the steering committee of the Berlin branch of the Writers' Union were deposed. Others have been reprimanded or expelled from the Party. In addition there are reports of writers and artists being harassed privately. In a substantial number of cases the harassment was sustained sufficiently long for the victim eventually to give way and ask to be allowed to emigrate . . . a request immediately granted by the authorities. (A paradoxical state of affairs whereby communists who wish to improve East German socialism are forced to leave while ordinary non-communist citizens are persecuted for daring to file emigration applications.) Over twenty of the GDR's top writers and entertainers have left the country. Apart from Biermann and Kunze, the exiles include the theatre producer Adolf Dresen, the singer Manfred Krug, the lyricist Sarah Kirsch, and a number of new talents who can now publish their work for the first time.

Prominent among the hitherto unknown authors are Hans-Joachim Schädlich, Jürgen Fuchs, and Thomas Brasch. All three write about the use, and abuse, of power in a communist state, about the relationship of literature and politics. Schädlich uses parables, Fuchs' writing is documentary literature. The alienation of the younger generation is a central theme of Thomas Brasch's collection of stories, parables, and short prose aptly entitled *The Sons Die Before the Fathers* (*Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, 1977). Brasch makes the mixture doubly unpalatable for the regime by depicting the alienation of the working class at the place where they are supposed to be the masters: at work. Brasch, a 34-year-old son of a senior Party official, draws on his own experience in factories, whence he himself was dispatched after repeated clashes with the authorities. His characters are no happier in their rela-

tionships than they are at work. To escape the emptiness of everyday life they get into fights, indulge in petty rebellion, disappear from work on little adventures – or try to flee to the West. But the Stasi (Secret Police) always catches up with them, these living proofs of the failure of the new society. Not surprisingly, the authorities refused to publish this book, so Brasch emigrated to the West.

The works of Brasch, Fuchs and Schädlich are the logical conclusion of a development which had its roots in the sixties. What began, in Christa Wolf's novel *Reflections about Christa T.*, as a subtle and almost unworldly meditation on a young woman's rejection of life, has ended less than ten years later in a series of works depicting in often harsh terms the alienation of many East Germans from socialist society and some of the mechanisms which are responsible for this state of affairs. Despite the protestation of the authors that their starting points are basically socialist, it is difficult to see how a communist regime, especially one which so often feels insecure, could tolerate them.

The authorities presumably hope, as did the Soviets when they expelled Solzhenitsyn, that the exiles, deprived of their source of inspiration, will either give up writing or become integrated into the West German literary scene. But what of the writers still in the GDR? In the months following the Biermann affair, the regime made a conscious effort to limit its own clampdown on the recalcitrant writers. Thus books, plays and films by those who signed the famous protest-letter were neither attacked nor withdrawn. Furthermore, works of theirs already in the pipeline were not stopped.

One example, referred to at the beginning of this article, was Christa Wolf's latest novel *Childhood Pattern*. Potentially this is an important novel, tackling as it does a question which has been almost taboo in the GDR: how did ordinary Germans – many of whom are now East German citizens – behave during the Nazi period? The official line has been that the socialist German state with its new social order has little contact with the Nazi past except via the much praised, and perhaps exaggerated, 'anti-fascist and resistance-fighter tradition'. The attitude has been, as Mrs Wolf observes on the dust-jacket of her book, that 'fascism existed outside us' ('us' being the GDR) and one has tried to 'delegate the past to

Below we list the West German and, where applicable, British publishers of the writers referred to in this article:

Stefan Heym Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag; Goldmann; Heine; Claasen; Bertelsmann; Hodder & Stoughton
Reiner Kunze Fischer Verlag; Hohwacht London Magazine Editions; Sidgwick & Jackson
Wolf Biermann Wagenbach; Kiepenhauer & Witsch; Pluto Press
Christa Wolf Fischer Verlag; Verlag Gebrüder Weiss; DTV (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag); Luchterhand
Volker Braun Fassenweiler Press; Suhrkamp
Günter Kunert Hansa Verlag; DTV
Thomas Brasch Rotbuch; Suhrkamp
Ulrich Plenzdorf Suhrkamp
Erich Loest Deutsche Verlagsanstalt
Jürgen Fuchs Rowohlt
Rudolf Bahro Europäische Verlagsanstalt; New Left Books

"the others" (i.e. the West Germans). This *noli me tangere* attitude is, of course, absurd. East Germany is as much a successor state to the Reich as the Federal Republic. Furthermore, the older generation in the GDR is no less compromised by Nazism than are its contemporaries in the West. Christa Wolf evidently harbours no illusions about the long-term after-effects of National Socialism on the mentality of the East German population, as she made clear during an interesting public discussion on her book, reprinted in the journal *Sinn und Form*:

Why are so many people of our generation so terribly frightened of the authorities? When did they develop this fear? Why are so many people fearful of standing up to authority? There must be a reason, which is why my book is also about the present. It tries to describe the situation before people behaved as they behave today.

Understandably the book aroused great interest in the country and the (significantly!) very small edition was sold out immediately. However, one Western reviewer felt that Christa Wolf fails to

get to grips with her central theme and that she is partly a victim of a phenomenon she touches on in her book: self-censorship.

A further concession to selected signatories of the Biermann petition has been to allow them to spend a fixed period in the West, officially to lecture and work, but also to reassess their own position. The regime presumably calculates that such a procedure would work with the milder critics; for those who, if they decided to return to the GDR when their time was up, would be prepared to knuckle under. The first beneficiary of this temporary exile system has been the writer Jurek Becker.

Against the fortunes of a Christa Wolf or the privileges of a Jurek Becker (the right to travel in the West is understandably one of the most sought-after privileges in the GDR), must be set the misfortunes of those Biermann signatories who can neither publish nor travel. What is perplexing is the lack of any identifiable criterion to explain why one writer is in favour, while another is not. Either there is no *Kulturpolitik* or there is a different one for each writer and artist. What makes the situation even more confusing is that the authorities occasionally allow greater leeway to authors who kept their noses clean during the Biermann affair. An apparent beneficiary of this policy is the hitherto little known Erich Loest, whose novel published last year centres on that now familiar subject: disillusionment with the regime and the negative consequences of this for personal felicity.

Deep divisions

The ambiguous nature of the current *Kulturpolitik* has left the country's best writers uncertain and demoralised. They feel repressed even if the authorities are only occasionally repressive. Several leading writers have expressed their frustration in the *feuilletons* of West German newspapers. The poet Günter Kunert, for instance, one of the original signatories of the Biermann petition, wrote an open letter to an East German colleague. It was because 'our problems cannot be dealt with where we work' that he chose a West German publication. The GDR Writers' Union was, he complained, no place for discussion because 'they shut you up before you even open your mouth - as if you were a fool or a mindless child'.

Such exercises in external freedom of speech, triggered off an episode last May which suggests that the East German leadership is deeply divided on cultural matters. No less a figure than Konrad Naumann, the powerful Party Secretary for Berlin and a leading member of the Politburo, attacked the exercise at the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee. What was remarkable was the language he used, which was clearly reminiscent of gloomier moments during the Ulbricht era. Naumann sharply criticised those 'bourgeois artists in the GDR' who publish their reform proposals in the West German press, insisting that they were primarily motivated by a desire to earn Western currency.

Naumann's motivational analysis is curious in view of his own love of luxury. Even more curious was the furious reply to Naumann's speech at the Writers' Congress, which was fairly summarised in *Neues Deutschland*, the Party newspaper. The counter-attack came from Stephan Hermlin, one of the most respected and most liberal of the older writers; he freely admitted that he was a (late) bourgeois writer and proceeded to argue that such a fact was compatible with his communist beliefs. Truly astonishing was his description of Naumann's speech as a piece of demagogic anti-intellectualism - a view, the *Neues Deutschland* reporter was quick to add, which was not shared by all the delegates!

That criticism of a leading member of the Politburo could be published would have been inconceivable even in the more halcyon days in the early seventies. But now? Any explanation of this extraordinary event must begin with Hermlin's friendship with Honecker, which goes back some 30 years. Some observers have drawn the conclusion that Honecker was reluctant for Naumann's crudities to go unchallenged. Honecker, I have been assured, was fighting off attempts by Naumann, as a leader of the hardline conservative faction in the Politburo, to tighten up still further.

Recent events suggest Honecker has not been too successful. Cultural policy has hardened. An important indicator was the cancellation of the premiere of *The Whisper Party*, a new play by Rudi Strahl - one of the most successful East German playwrights - which tackled the controversial issues raised by the Intershops. These stores sell Western goods largely unobtainable in the ordinary shops. They play an important role in

satisfying consumer demand and blunting discontent with the normal retail outlets. However, the Intershops only accept West German currency, so only those East Germans who have access to D-Marks – mostly those who have Western visitors – can buy there. This has caused much bad blood among those denied access. They feel they are excluded from getting many desirable consumer goods and claim that such discrimination is unworthy of a regime which officially disapproves of inequality and privilege. *The Whisper Party* would have been the first work to tackle the issues raised by the Intershops, and a speech by Naumann, indirectly justifying the cancellation, suggests that the play criticised these special stores for encouraging a consumer society, regardless of the greed and social resentment this might unleash. Naumann's views are relevant because the play was to have been shown in the Maxim Gorki Theatre – in Naumann's own bailiwick of East Berlin. A short time later the party secretary at the theatre, Reinhard Michalke, wrote a newspaper article expressly supporting Naumann's views. He also said:

There is always one taboo: and that relates to the power question and the leading role of the Party.

Michalke's formulation directly contradicts Honecker's proclamation seven years earlier that in his view, 'there need be no taboos in the arts so long as one's starting point is basically socialist'. But far from ticking off Michalke, Honecker last February took the unusual step of endorsing Naumann's cultural line. Clearly Honecker is under considerable pressure.

Although Honecker's original *Kulturpolitik* is in disarray, it would be unwise to assume that we are on the threshold of a more thorough repression. Liberal-minded writers in East Germany continue to believe that Honecker wishes to save what he can of his policy. Honecker is, after all,

Religion in Communist Lands

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both Party boss and head of state. He is no figure-head. Furthermore, he shares with his hardline critics a wish to avoid another confrontation with the writers. Only peace in the cultural sphere will enable the leadership to tackle the much more important economic problems. Here Honecker is under fire as well, especially from the Russians who fear that the import of technology and consumer goods from West Germany could lead to a dangerous dependence on Bonn. But Honecker has managed to retain Brezhnev's confidence – even at the price of timely concessions; and as long as Brezhnev rules, Honecker is safe. □